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UNWRITTEN LITERATURE OF HAWAII¹

By NATHANIEL B. EMERSON

The *hula*—the dance, with its songs and ceremonies—stood for very much to the ancient Hawaiian; it was to him in place of our concert-hall and lecture-room, our opera and theater, and thus became one of his chief means of social enjoyment. Besides this it kept the communal imagination in living touch with the nation's legendary past. The hula had songs proper to itself, but it found a mine of inexhaustible wealth in the epics and wonder-myths that celebrated the doings of the volcanic goddess Pele and her compatriots. Thus in the cantillations of the old-time hula we find a ready-made anthology that includes every species of composition in the whole range of Hawaiian poetry.

This epic of Pele was chiefly a more or less detached series of poems forming a story addressed not to the closet reader, but to the eye and ear and heart of the assembled chiefs and people; and it was sung. The Hawaiian song, its note of joy *par excellence*, was the *oli*; but it must be noted that in every species of Hawaiian poetry—*mele*—whether epic, or eulogy, or prayer, sounding through them all we shall find the lyric note.

The most telling record of a people's intimate life is the record which it unconsciously makes in its songs. This record which the Hawaiian people have left of themselves is full and specific. When, therefore, we ask what emotions stirred the heart of the old-time Hawaiian as he approached the great themes of life and death, of ambition and jealousy, of sexual love, conjugal love, and parental love; what his attitude toward nature and the dread forces of earthquake and storm, and the mysteries of spirit and the hereafter—we shall find our answer in the songs and prayers and recitations of the hula.

¹ Introduction to an unpublished manuscript, *The Unwritten Literature of Hawaii*. Presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, August, 1905.

The hula, it is true, has been unfortunate in the mode and manner of its introduction to us moderns. An institution of divine, that is, religious, origin, the hula has in modern times wandered so far and fallen so low that foreign and critical esteem has come to associate it with the riotous and passionate ebullitions of Polynesian kings and the voluptuous posturings of their flesh-pots. We must, however, make a just distinction between the gestures and bodily contortions presented by the men and women, the actors in the hula, and their uttered words. "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." In truth the actors in the hula no longer suit the action to the word. The utterance harks back to the golden age; the gestures are trumped up by the passion of the hour, or dictated by the master of the hula, to whom the real meaning of the old bards is oftentimes a sealed casket.

Whatever indelicacy attaches in modern times to the gestures and contortions of the hula dancers, the old-time hula songs were in large measure untainted with grossness. If there ever was a Polynesian Arcadia, and if it were possible for true reports of the doings and sayings of the Polynesians to reach us from that happy land—reports of their joys and sorrows, their love-makings and their jealousies, their family spats and reconciliations, their worship of beauty and of the gods and goddesses who walked in the garden of beauty—we may, I think, say that such a report would be in substantial agreement with the report that is here offered.

If any one finds himself unable to tolerate the nude, he must not enter the galleries of art. If one's virtue will not endure the love-making of Arcadia, let him banish that myth from his imagination and hie to a convent or a nunnery.

For an account of the first hula we may look to the story of Pele. On one occasion that goddess begged her sisters to dance and sing before her; but they all excused themselves, saying they did not know the art. At that moment in came little Hiiaka, the youngest and the favorite. Unknown to her sisters, the little maiden had practised the dance under the tuition of her friend, the beautiful, but ill-fated, Hopoe. When the invitation was banteringly passed on to her, to the surprise of all Hiiaka modestly consented.

The wave-beaten sand-beach was her floor, the open air her hall.
Feet and hands and swaying form kept time to her improvisation :

Look Puna's a-dance in the wind ;
The palm-groves of Kea-au shaken.
Haena and the woman Hopoe dance and sway,
On the beach Nana-huki —
A dance of purest delight —
Down by the sea Nana-huki.

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The hula was a religious service, in which poetry, music, pantomime, and the dance lent themselves under the forms of dramatic art to the refreshment of men's minds. Its view of life was idyllic and it gave itself to the celebration of those mythical times when gods and goddesses moved upon the earth as men and women and when men and women were as gods. As to subject-matter, its warp was spun largely from the bowels of the old-time mythology, that became cords through which the race maintained vital connection with its mysterious past. Interwoven with those, forming the woof, were threads of a thousand hues and of many fabrics, representing the imaginations of the poet, the speculations of the philosopher, the aspirations of many a thirsty soul, as well as the ravings and flame-colored pictures of the sensualist, the mutterings and incantations of the kahuna, the mysteries and paraphernalia of Polynesian mythology, the annals of the nation's history — the material, in fact, which in another nation and under different circumstances would have gone to the making of its poetry, its drama, its literature.

The people were superstitiously religious ; one finds their drama saturated with religious feeling, hedged about with tabu, loaded down with prayer and sacrifice. They were poetical ; nature was full of voices for their ears ; their thoughts came to them as images ; nature was to them an allegory ; all this found expression in their dramatic art. They were musical ; their drama must needs be cast in forms to suit their ideas of rhythm, of melody and harmony — poetic harmony. They were, moreover, the children of passion, sensuous, worshipful of whatever lends itself to pleasure. How

then could the dramatic efforts of this primitive people, still in the bonds of animalism, escape the smirch of passion? It is interesting to note that the songs and poetical pieces which have come down to us from the remotest antiquity are generally inspired with a purer sentiment and a loftier purpose than the modern; but it can be said of them all that when they do step into the mud of animalism it is not to tarry and wallow in it; it is rather with an unconscious naivete, as of a child thinking no evil.

The most advanced modern is no doubt better able to hark back to the sweetness and light and music of the primeval world than the veriest wigwam-dweller that ever chipped an arrowhead or twanged a bow. It is not so much what the primitive man can give us as what we can find in him that is worth our while. The light that a Goethe, a Thoreau, or a Kipling can project into Arcadia is only that mirrored in their own nature.

If one mistakes not the temper and mind of this generation, we are living in an age that is not content to let perish one seed of thought, or one single phase of life that can be rescued from the drift of time. We mourn the extinction of the buffalo of the plains and the birds of the islands, thinking — rightly — that life is somewhat less rich and full without them. What of the people of the plains and of the islands of the sea — is their contribution so nothingless that one can affirm that the orbit of man's mind is complete without it?

Comparison is unavoidable between the place held by the dance in ancient Hawaii and that occupied by the dance in our modern society. The ancient Hawaiians did not as a rule personally and informally indulge in the dance for their own amusement as does pleasure-loving society at the present time. Like the Shah of Persia, but for very different reasons, Hawaiians of the old time left it to be done for them by a paid body of trained performers. This was not because the art and practice of the hula was held in disrepute — quite the reverse — but because it was an accomplishment requiring special education and arduous training both in song and dance, and more especially because it was a religious matter and must be guarded against profanation by the observance of tabus and the performance of priestly rites.

This fact, which we find paralleled in every form of common amusement, sport, and entertainment in ancient Hawaii, sheds a strong light on the genius of the Hawaiian. We are wont to think of the old-time Hawaiians as light-hearted children of nature given to spontaneous outbursts of song and dance as the mood seized, quite as the rustics of "merrie England" joined hands and tripped "the light fantastic toe" in the joyous month of May, or shouted the harvest home at a later season. The genius of the Hawaiian was different. With him the dance was an affair of pre-meditation, an organized effort, guarded by the traditions of a somber religion. And this characteristic, with qualifications, will be found to belong to every variety of popular Hawaiian sport and amusement. Exception, of course, must be made of the unorganized sports of childhood. One is almost inclined to generalize and to say that those children of nature, as we are wont to call them, were in this regard less free and spontaneous than the more advanced race to which we are proud to belong. But if the approaches to the temple of Terpsichore with them were more guarded, we may confidently assert that their enjoyment therein was more deep and abandoned.

HONOLULU,
HAWAII.